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*Volume-6, No-1 (Jan-June 2016)*



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## **Women and Religion: Portrayal of Women in Christianity and Islam**

DOI No.: 10.5958/2321-5860.2016.00009.6

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*Status of women has been the subject of consideration and discussion over the past few years. In contemporary times, women studies, feminism, women rights and gender equity are the buzz words. If we try to reach out to the history to know as to what has led to this situation that so much is being done for one gender; the answer lies in the fact that since the time immemorial, there has been a drastic distinction between the roles of men and women and religious doctrines and interpretation of religious texts have played a major role in creating and upholding this gender based dichotomy. So this paper is an attempt to understand the portrayal of woman in religious texts and the status of women in context to the different interpretations of sacred literature of the very popular religions; namely, Christianity and Islam. The methodology for this exposition has been primarily descriptive and referential, based on secondary sources, mainly the commentaries on the sacred texts of both these religious faiths.*

**Keywords:** Women, Islam, Christianity

### **Christianity and Islam: An Overview**

Christianity and Islam have common roots; scholars define both these religious faiths as offshoots of Judaism (Jewish religion), therefore, they share historical and traditional connection. Both are most popular monotheistic religions of the world, believing in one God. Christianity considers Jesus was the son of God and 'Messiah' for humanity; whose purpose to be on earth was to save mankind from the consequences of sin. Islam comes from an Arabic word, meaning "peace" and "submission." Islam teaches that one can only find peace in one's life by submitting to Almighty God (Allah) in heart, soul and deed. The central holy text of Islam is the Quran. Muslims believe that the words of the Quran were directly revealed by God, through the messenger of God, Prophet Muhammad. Other than Quran, the teachings in Islam are based on Hadith (elaboration by Prophet Muhammad). In both the religions, image of God is portrayed as masculine. Messiah the Jesus Christ and Messenger the Abraham Mohammad are males.

### **Portrayal of Women in Christianity**

Bible, the holy book of Christians has been the primary source of authority but it does not offer straightforward explanations to any phenomenon. Bible

is made up of many different books written and altered for centuries. Mainly, it consists of Old Testament (the original Hebrew Bible, the sacred scriptures of the Jewish faith, written at different times between 1200 and 165 BC); New Testament (27 books, written between 50 and 100 AD). Like every religion, Christianity too has demarcated gender roles. However, Christians' attitudes towards women are based much upon different interpretations of Biblical texts, done by proponents of the religions at different time spans. Women movements of the early times have charged Biblical texts, both of Old and New Testaments as patriarchal, void of women's authority in all spheres of life. They believe that church has always been the domain of celibate males, who have chosen to emphasize teachings that were negative towards women so that women could be kept at secondary position, primarily in church and secondarily in society. However, gradually, with the assertions of many women groups and emergence of new sects such as, the Quakers, the Methodists, the Baptists and some provinces of Anglican Communion, the change in the perceptions came and a move towards egalitarian society got initiated. And, in the later stages women also got influential positions in the churches of these new sects. In this section, the portrayal of women in Christianity has been discussed in chronological order.

### **Early Christianity:**

Since very beginning of the religion, women's role and position has been interpreted by proponents and preachers (Priests of Roman Catholic Church) of Christianity in the following ways:

1. Women as inferior to men: In the book of Genesis (first book of Christian Bible), there are two stories about creation of human beings. In the first creation story (Genesis 1:27) God is described as creating man, both male and female at the same time: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." This might be interpreted as implying equality between the two genders. In the second creation story, (Genesis 2:7) God formed only a man, 'Adam'. God created man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. Further, realizing that this created man needed a helper, God created 'Eve' out of one of Adam's ribs. Adam exercised authority over Eve, by calling her 'woman' as she is taken out from man. Second story has been more popularized and 'Helper' word has been repeatedly used in texts and preached by church, denoting inferior status to women. St. Paul, who taught the values of Christianity to the first century people, propagated that women are subordinate to men because they are created after men, from men and for men. There is natural hierarchy; to be male is the norm, the female half of the human race is other and subordinate
2. Women as the initiator of all evil on earth: Christian writers of the

earlier times, further describe this creation story by portraying Eve as unfaithful. When Eve saw that the fruit of the tree of knowledge and found it very tempting; despite the warning of God, she took some and ate it; and she also gave some to Adam, who was with her, and he also ate it. It has been argued that as Adam was created first, he was not unfaithful; he committed crime because he was persuaded by Eve. If the woman(Eve) had not tempted the man (Adam), he would not have committed the sin of disobeying the God's will. Therefore, woman has been projected as the wicked creation who initiated evil on earth.

3. Punishment to woman is greater than man: As Adam and Eve committed sin by disobeying God; they were punished. Adam's (man) punishment has been defined in terms of earning livelihood, which was believed to be difficult as earth has been cursed and growing food could be strenuous and painful. Eve's (woman) punishment has been called as more intense. She will have to bear the pain of child bearing and nurturing; at the same she will desire her husband who will exercise authority over her.
4. Women are 'temptresses': It is been a popularized notion in Christianity that Eve was responsible for introducing Adam to sexuality. So, women always tempt men for sex, which is seen as greatest of all temptations by church that propagates celibacy.
5. Male seeds provide the form of human body: Christianity grew up with genesis story of Eve (woman) being the root cause for evils. Further, with the advent of fourth century BC, Aristotle introduced the idea that male seed provides the 'form' of the human body. The woman's part is only limited to receive the formative part of the male seed that creates a child.
6. Female is malformed: Aristotle and other advocates of this approach, elaborated that as woman's role is passive, limited only to take the seed from the creative man; if all goes well, the baby will be male, but if some accident occurs the male form is subverted and produces an inferior or malformed baby, that is female (Drury, 1994). So, in earlier centuries, every baby girl was considered as failure, useful only for her ability to bear children that also with the will of men. It reinforced the notion that man reflects the image of God, and woman is created from man, so she becomes the image of God only when combined with man.
7. Roman Empire: Christianity took shape in the Roman Empire and in those times after so much loss of man power, their emphasis was on rebuilding the loss. So the most popular ideal of Christianity, celibacy, underwent change and people were expected to get married; girls were forced to marry at fourteen so that several children could be produced.

Thus, in its beginning only, through the interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, the presentation of Eve lead to build up an anti-female society. The negative picture of Eve as a temptress and origin of evil has been firmly inculcated in the minds of men and women. Right from childhood



Christians are told the story with the negative image of Eve and they grow up with this lasting negative impression. It resulted in imposing of several restrictions to the women of those times. For instance, fathers enjoyed the absolute authority on unmarried women and husbands on married. They were not allowed to move freely without their permissions. They could not testify in courts and were barred talking to or meeting strangers. Rosemary R. Ruether quotes, "the scapegoating of Eve as the cause of the fall of Adam makes all women, as her daughters, guilty for the radical impotence of 'man' in the face of evil, which is paid for only by the death of Christ." (Ruether, 1983).

### **Later Christianity: 16th century onwards**

Although, the later genre of Christian writers (Protestant theologians) also emphasized on the sin of Eve and her inferiority to Adam but their attitude was little more positive than the previous celibate priests of Catholic Church.

1. **Women as Image of God:** Martin Luther in his lectures on Genesis, described women as also being created as the image of God who was destined to inherit the glory of the future life. Eve was created to have the equal share of Adam but because she committed sin, she was subjected to inferiority and sorrows. Martin Luther, himself was a married man, so he valued women in a positive way and quoted that 'wives are adorned with a blessing and glory of motherhood, namely that we all are conceived, born and nurtured by them' (Lectures on Genesis 3.16). He criticized proponents of celibacy, who claimed women as temptresses.
2. **Motherhood was Glorified:** Martin Luther, in his lectures on Genesis, equated motherhood with Christ. Like Christ, mothers too nourish, love, care and bless their children. Thus, the duty of mothers is not the result of any punishment. He claimed that it is the fault of 'ungodly celibacy that aspersions are cast against female sex' (lectures on Genesis, 3.16). However, he reinforced the superiority of husbands by claiming that God has assigned the work of care of children and kitchen to women under the authority of their husbands.
3. **Role of New Sects in Improving Women's Status:** In the religious turmoil in seventeenth century, new sects like 'Quakers' and 'Shakers', lead by a few radical leaders emerged. Quakers preached ideals of equality between both sexes. They believed that woman and man were both created in the image of God; inequality was the result of the sin that Adam and Eve both committed and equality has been further restored by Christ for those who followed him. For them in marriage, husband and wife are equals and wife need not promise to obey husband but the both need to promise to obey God. There was no priestly authority, no set forms of worship and sacraments. Being deviated from the main religion, they were denied education in existing universities. So, they

established their own education system where boys and girls were given equal education in their schools, by eighteenth century. Benefitted from this, women took up lead roles in conducting meetings, supervising marriages and taking independent decisions for children. Further, Shakers sect originated in late eighteenth century as rivals of Quakers; they went even further in promoting egalitarian values. The Shakers promoted a celibate life, (though did not oppose marriage absolutely) in which brothers and sisters are equal. They started living separately, forming their own 'family communities', forbidding gender hierarchies.

4. Scientific Evolution Theories: In nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the increase in biological knowledge and popularity of scientific theories of evolution, Christianity's Genesis of origin was charged as mythical than a historical fact. This worked as the tide against established basis of religion and made church rethink their most fundamental beliefs. Women movements got a push, particularly in this era, challenging the existing notions of them being an inferior gender by birth.

### **Present Scenario**

As from the beginning of Christianity, women's position has remained in subjugation but with changes happened, over many centuries, there has been a move towards egalitarian society. Though the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Churches, still find authority in their traditional teachings but in West during nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women's voices have been heard. In contemporary times, Christian women are seen publicly, taking roles of authority in the male dominated spheres. Amidst the backdrop of industrial revolution, Christian women have played a role in developing and running of many the modern world's education and health care systems. However, women still had to work under the nominal control of a man for missionary work and they are still denied other influential public roles in the churches. But in the recent times, Catholic women join religious orders in large numbers, where their influence and control is exercised particularly strong in the running of primary education for children, high schooling for girls, and in nursing, hospitals, orphanages and aged care facilities etc. While Catholicism and Orthodoxy adhered to traditional gender restrictions on ordination to the priesthood, Women's roles in Protestant Churches have become more prominent in recent decades. Women have been also elected as army chiefs in West in this era. New Zealander Penny Jamieson became the first woman in the world to be ordained a bishop of the Anglican Church in 1990 (although the queens of England have for centuries inherited the position of the Supreme Governor of the Church of England upon their ascensions to the throne). In the developing world, people continued to convert to Christianity in large numbers. Among the most famous and influential women missionaries of



the period was the Catholic nun Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her work in bringing help to suffering humanity.

### **Portrayal of Women in Islam**

Many proponents of Islam are of the opinion that Quran has declared every human being as equal irrespective of gender. However, there is striking contrast between classical teachings of Islam and actual lived experience of Muslim women. So in the following sections, we shall try to understand the position of women in Islam in both the contexts.

### **Men and Women are Equals: Interpretation of Traditional Texts**

Unlike other popular beliefs, Islam does not blame Eve alone for the First Sin. The Quran makes it very clear that both Adam and Eve were tempted, that they both committed sin, and God's pardon was granted to both after their repentance, and that God addressed them jointly (Badawi, 1994). In fact the Quran gives the impression that Adam was more to blame for that First Sin, from which emerged prejudice against woman and suspicion of her deeds. But Islam does not justify such prejudice or suspicion because both Adam and Eve were equally in error, and if we are to blame Eve we should blame Adam as much or even more.

Woman is recognized by Islam as a full and equal partner of man in the procreation of mankind. He is the father; she is the mother, and both are essential for life. Her role is not less vital than his. By this partnership she has an equal share in every aspect; she is entitled to equal rights, she undertakes equal responsibilities, and in her there are as many qualities and as much humanity as there are in her partner.

### **God says:**

*"O humankind! Verily We have created your from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other"*

(source: <http://www.guide2islam.ca/what-is-the-status-of-a-woman-in-islam.php>)

This implies that she is equal to man in bearing personal and common responsibilities and in receiving rewards for her deeds. She is acknowledged as an independent personality, in possession of human qualities and worthy of spiritual aspirations. Her human nature is neither inferior to nor deviant from that of man. Both are members of one another.

### **God says:**

*"Never will I cause to be lost the work of any of you, be the male or female; you are members, one of another..."*

(source: <http://www.guide2islam.ca/what-is-the-status-of-a-woman-in-islam.php>)

*islam.php)*

She is equal to man in the pursuit of education and knowledge. When Islam enjoins the seeking of knowledge upon Muslims, it makes no distinction between man and woman. Almost 14 centuries ago, Muhammad declared that the pursuit of knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim male and female. This declaration was very clear and was implemented by Muslims throughout history. She is entitled to freedom of expression as much as man is. Her sound opinions are to be taken into consideration and cannot be disregarded just because she happens to belong to the female sex. It is reported in the Quran and history that women not only expressed their opinions freely but also argued and participated in serious discussions with the Prophet himself as well as with other Muslim leaders (Quran 58:1-4; 60:10-12). Besides, there were occasions when Muslim women expressed their views on legislative matters of public interest and stood in opposition to the Caliphs, who then accepted the sound arguments of these women. Further, it has been argued that according to historical records women also participated in public life with the early Muslims, especially in times of emergencies. Women used to accompany the Muslim armies engaged in battles to nurse the wounded, prepare supplies, serve the warriors, and so on. They were not shut behind iron bars or considered worthless creatures and deprived of souls.

### **Women in Islamic Religious Practice**

It has been argued that according to Islam, all souls irrespective of gender are accountable to God for their religious duties. Therefore, in terms of religious obligations, such as Daily Prayers, Fasting, and Pilgrimage, woman is no different from man. In some cases indeed, woman has certain advantages over man. For example, the woman is exempted from the daily prayers and from fasting during her menstrual periods and forty days after childbirth. She is also exempted from fasting during her pregnancy and when she is nursing her baby if there is any threat to her health or her baby's. If she has the missed fasting during the month of Ramadan, she can make up for the missed days whenever she can. She does not have to make up for the prayers missed for any of the above reasons. This indicates a tender touch of the Islamic teachings for they are considerate of the fact that a woman may be nursing her baby or caring for him/her, and thus may be unable to make up the religious obligations.

### **Islamic Traditional Practices Denoting Inferior Status of Women**

Therefore, as argued by proponents of Islam, according to the historical interpretations of Quran, women and men were considered as equals and women were entitled to all rights like men in terms of education, participating in religious practices and even participating in important discussions with Prophet. However in the Islamic traditions, there many practices prevalent that denote inferior and submissive status of women.

1. **Domestic Violence in Islam:** It has been argued that wife-beating in the Muslim world comes from the teachings of Islamic religious texts such as the Hadiths. It has been an accepted part of Islam since its inception. Domestic violence has been used as a tool to maintain control and dominance over Muslim women, this has created an intensely patriarchal society where men rule women and women must submit to men. Muhammad himself declared "A man will not be asked as to why he beat his wife."(source: <http://www.answering-islam.org/Authors/Arlandson/beatng.htm>)
2. **Honour Killings :** Honour related violence is a physical violence that is inflicted on an individual by perpetrators on the grounds that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family, clan, or community by engaging in any conduct that is perceived as immoral or unacceptable by religious or cultural standards. This violence almost always happens in Muslim families. Muslim women are killed for many honour related reasons, like being raped, associating with non-related males, getting pregnant outside of marriage, and for the belief they might have done something else immoral. In Muslim communities, such acts are considered as crimes that demand death in order to restore the family's honour. The entire family may all collaborate on this, and in some cases the whole community may participate in such acts.
3. **Following Rules in Islamic Marriage Denote Subjugation of Women**(source: <http://www.light-of-life.com/>)
  - ❖ Woman should be less than the age of man and much younger so that she can conceive more children.
  - ❖ She should be less in esteem, power, honour and money; since men are to support women (sura-al-Nisa' 4:34).
  - ❖ She should preferably be a virgin. Muhammad said, "seeks virgins; they are sweeter of mouth, have more productive wombs and can be contented with the least". Beauty is the quality that should not be neglected when looking for a wife.
  - ❖ Under Islamic marital jurisprudence, Muslim men are allowed to practice polygyny, that is, they can have more than one wife at the same time, up to a total of four. Polyandry, the practice of a woman having more than one husband, by contrast, is not permitted.
4. **Hijab or Veil :** In Islamic tradition, veil is imposed on women in order to prevent temptation and to preserve society as it is believed that she is responsible for the crises that befall families. It has been argued that women are responsible for tempting men by despicable display of her charms. Islam requires women to wear veil to protect her chastity, virtue and honour; this preserves her noble character from those who have weak hearts and sick conscience.
5. **Rules of Inheritance :** According to pre-Islamic Arabs, men only had right to inherit. This formed the basis of patriarchal system that continues till today and also remains the basic feature of Islamic law of

inheritance. Though, there is provision of some share for women in inheritance but larger part goes to the males only.

### **Islamic law of Sharia (Sura al- Nisa 4:11)**

"God charges you, concerning your children: to the male the like of the portion of two females, and if they be women above two, then for them two-thirds of what he leaves, but if she be one then to her a half; and to his parents to each one of the two the sixth of what he leaves, if he has children; but if he has no children, and his heirs are his parents, a third to his mother, or, if he has brothers, to his mother a sixth, after any bequest he may bequeath, or any debt. Your fathers and your sons- you know not which out of them is nearer in profit to you. So God apportions; surely God is All-knowing, All-wise."

(source: <http://www.light-of-life.com/>)

Thus, it implies though in Quran writings, woman has been equated to man in every aspect but these existing practices imply that she is given a subjugated position in Islamic tradition. Domestic violence, honour killings are the mediums used by men folk to exercise control over women. Rules related to marriage indicate that woman is selected only considering her physical appearance and for reproduction; it's only her body that is taken into consideration.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Biblical texts, in the initial stages clearly declare women as second to man, an initiator of sin in the world and temptress etc. The celibate priests of churches preached to keep women at bay in all spheres of life. They denied her education and women were supposed to keep silence in churches, obeying submissively. However, the texts from 16th century onwards uplifted her position and new sects in Christianity promoted egalitarian values and in nineteenth and twentieth centuries thus role and the status of Christian women improved. On the contrary, verses of Quran have awarded equal status to man and woman but different interpretations and also may be due to influence of other cultures, Muslim women are subject to many disparities and ill-treatment in the name of religion.

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In this backdrop, as well as gaining insight from earlier studies and present empirical study, the paper applying anthropological field work methods endeavors to understand what changes are taking place in various practices of the Todas which are changing their age old identity. It was kept in mind to identify those indicators of continuity and change which were indicated in the monograph, "The Todas" in 1906 by W.H.R. Rivers. After a century of referred study this anthropological field work was conducted to identify the changes arising among the Todas. During the field work in four different Munds of the Todas viz Manjikal Mund, Muttunad Mund, Tarnad Mund and Parthal Mund in the year 2016 it was found that though females are more inclined towards education and playing very important role in social economy of the Toda family, they are yet till today not allowed to enter in Toda dairy temples. As a result of it they have devised a new way in their life style by adapting to Christian way of religious practices and have started visiting to churches. For their empowerment, they have devised their own ways of micro financing by developing their self help groups to improve their economic status. Now, Toda are shifting from pastoral/ dairy based economy to horticultural and agricultural activities. The polyandry which was practiced as a rule in this tribe is now almost extinct and paper tempts to call them ex-polyandrous tribe.

### **What has not changed: a matter related to identity of Todas**

**Toda hairstyle:** Toda women sport a fantastic hairdo. The hair on the top of the head is combed smoothly and then shaped into corkscrew curls which hang down to the shoulders. So smooth and precise are these curls that it seems impossible to believe that they are not the result of the labours of an experienced hairdresser.



Plate 1:Toda hair style

### **Way of welcoming an outsider-**

When I reached Toda munds for my fieldwork, I found Todas welcoming me with their Putukuli. Most of the time they invited me to their houses,



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